

He had spent the last five years, he said ruefully, running for office, and he did not know any real public officials, people to run a government, serious men. The only ones he knew, he admitted, were politicians, and if this seemed a denigration of his own kind, it was not altogether displeasing to the older man. Politicians *did* need men to serve, to run the government. The implication was obvious. Politicians could run Pennsylvania and Ohio, and if they could not run Chicago they could at least deliver it. But politicians run the world? What did they know about the Germans, the French, the Chinese? He needed experts for that, and now he was summoning them.

The old man was Robert A. Lovett, the symbolic expert, representative of the best of the breed, a great surviving link to a then unquestioned past, to the wartime and postwar successes of the Stimson-Marshall-Acheson years. He was the very embodiment of the Establishment, a man who had a sense of country rather than party. He was above petty divisions, so he could say of his friends, as so many of that group could, that he did not even know to which political party they belonged. He was a man of impeccable credentials, indeed he passed on other people's credentials, deciding who was safe and sound, who was ready for advancement and who was not. He was so much a part of that atmosphere that he was immortalized even in the fiction of his class. Louis Auchincloss, who was the unofficial laureate of that particular world, would have one of his great fictional lawyers say: "I've got that Washington bug. Ever since I had that job with Bob Lovett . . ."

He had the confidence of both the financial community and the Congress. He had been good, very good, going up on the Hill in the old days and soothing things over with recalcitrant Midwestern senators; and he was soft on nothing, that above all—no one would accuse Robert Lovett of being soft. He was a witty and graceful man himself, a friend not just of the powerful, the giants of politics and industry, but of people like Robert Benchley and Lillian Hellman and John O'Hara. He had wit and charm. Even in those tense moments in 1950 when he had been at Defense and MacArthur was being MacArthur, Lovett had amused his colleagues at high-level meetings with great imitations of MacArthur's vanities, MacArthur in Korea trying to comb his few strands of hair from side to side over his pate to hide his baldness, while standing in the blast of prop-plane engines at Kimpo Airfield.

They got along well, these two men who had barely known each other before. Jack Kennedy the President-elect, who in his campaign had summoned the nation's idealism, but who was at least as skeptical as he was idealistic, curiously ill at ease with other people's overt idealism, preferring in private the tart and darker view of the world and of mankind of a skeptic like Lovett.

In addition to his own misgivings he had constantly been warned by one of his more senior advisers that in order to deal with State effectively, he had to have a real man there, that State was filled with sissies in striped pants and

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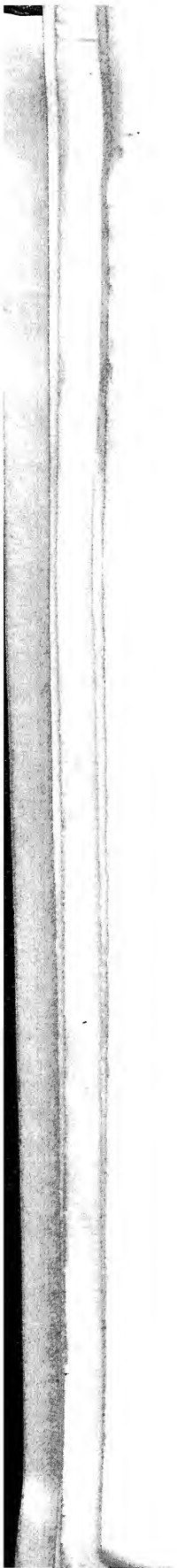
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The Best and the Brightest



Chapter One

A COLD DAY IN DECEMBER. LONG AFTERWARD, AFTER THE assassination and all the pain, the older man would remember with great clarity the young man's grace, his good manners, his capacity to put a visitor at ease. He was concerned about the weather, that the old man not be exposed to the cold or to the probing questions of freezing newspapermen, that he not have to wait for a cab. Instead he had guided his guest to his own car and driver. The older man would remember the young man's good manners almost as clearly as the substance of their talk, though it was an important meeting.

In just a few weeks the young man would become President of the United States, and to the newspapermen standing outside his Georgetown house, there was an air of excitement about every small act, every gesture, every word, every visitor to his temporary headquarters. They complained less than usual, the bitter cold notwithstanding; they felt themselves a part of history: the old was going out and the new was coming in, and the new seemed exciting, promising.

On the threshold of great power and great office, the young man seemed to have everything. He was handsome, rich, charming, candid. The candor was part of the charm: he could beguile a visitor by admitting that everything the visitor proposed was right, rational, proper—but he couldn't do it, not this week, this month, this term. Now he was trying to put together a government, and the candor showed again. He was self-deprecating with the older man.